DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 174 992 CS 205 009

AUTHOR Morris, Barbra S.
TITLE Videotape and Writing in the University of Michigan Assessment.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 10p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (30th, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 5-7, 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Composition (Literary): Educational Research: Expository Writing: Higher Education: *Student Evaluation: *Student Placement: Teaching Techniques: *Videotape Recordings: *Visual Stimuli: *Writing Exercises: Writing Skills

ABSTRACT

The development and testing of a visual stimulus for writing, to be used in the initial assessment of liberal arts students at the University of Michigan, is described in this paper. The paper first discusses the questions considered by the university committee charged with establishing the assessment process regarding student writers' fluency, performance, and reaction to visual and written stimuli. It then describes the production of a video stimulus and its test with 270 undergraduate students, and notes that the comments of readers (who did not know which stimulus students had received) indicated that students performed slightly better from the visual stimulus, using more complex, individualized, and well-balanced arguments. Finally, paired responses are taken from sample student essays to illustrate readers' observations. (AEA)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY

ED174992

Presented at the 4-C's on Friday, April 6, 1979
Barbra S. Morris
English Composition Board
University of Michigan

VIDEOTAPE AND WRITING IN THE UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN ASSESSMENT

The new University of Michigan undergraduate writing program requires that all students entering the College of Literature, Science and the Arts (LS&A) compose an impromptu essay. LS&A is the largest undergraduate college in the University with a population of approximately 14,000 students. The entrance essay does not influence admission to LS&A. Instead, it determines placement into one of three categories: (1) tutorial, which must precede introductory composition; (2) introductory composition, which must be taken in one of the first two semesters after entrance; (3) exempted, which requires no underclass writing course. To complete their college composition program students in all three categories must take an upper-level writing course in their junior or senior years. Departments throughout the College offer these advanced writing courses and students are strongly encouraged to take them in their area of concentration.

The English Composition Board (ECB), the unit charged with overseeing fulfillment of all College writing requirements, assembled a University Consulting Committee to consider the initial assessment process. The Consulting Committee used results from a college-wide faculty survey to identify the kinds of writing students would most often be expected to produce in undergraduate courses. According to faculty, skill with argumentative or persuasive writing would be most useful to students, whether they were writing in the humanities, in the arts, or in the sciences. Beyond that clear directive, four other priorities for the assessment were agreed upon by the University Consulting Committee:

(1) the stimulus must provoke sufficient fluency in writers for readers to determine placement accurately;
(2) topics for writing must appeal to students from diverse backgrounds;
(3) audience, purpose, and language level must be indicated in the stimulus; and
(4) directions for writing must be free of threatening or discouraging admonitions.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Barbra S. Morris

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

CS205889

The assessment essay is written during orientation when entering students take several placement examinations. Results of these examinations are used by academic counselors to place students at appropriate levels in language, science, and mathematics courses. Students write the assessment essay at the beginning of the testing day and have one hour to complete the task. Although topics change daily, directions for writing remain constant. Audience and purpose are specified: tone, level of diction, and stance are established by the opening sentences which students are directed to copy into their bluebooks. For example, the following stimulus was used on several orientation days during the summer of 1978:

> Write an essay intended to help parents establish a particular policy of television watching for their young children. Explain to them why you advocate such a policy.
>
> Begin your essay with the following sentence (which you should copy into your bluebook):
>
> > The average home in North America has a television set on for more than 6 hours a day.
>
> Select one of the following as your second sentence and copy it into your bluebook:
>
> A. Every member of the average North American family watches at least three hours of television a day.
>
> B. A television critic in The New Republic magazine writes that "Little children of all social classes are cooped up inside all day with few playmates and little to do... A good television program could give these children and their mothers a lot of help."
>
> C. Since all experience contributes to learning, children in North American homes can learn a great deal from television.
>
> Now complete an essay developing the idea that follows from the first two sentences. Remember that these sentences will be the beginning of your own argument, so do your best to make that argument convincing to the parents who are your readers.

The University Consulting Committee noted that changes in the topics would provide answers to some questions about the influence of assignments upon the composing process. For example: Which topics consistently produce fluency? What features within a topic influence the writer's performance? How

does the medium for the stimulus relate to the writer's performance?

Answers to these questions have been forthcoming. First, which topics consistently produce fluency? All topics used during the summer of 1978 stimulated sufficient writing for readers to determine placement; only in a few instances did students note in their bluebooks that the subject created serious difficulty for them. (The ECB established an appeal procedure for students who felt their orientation essays led to inaccurate placement.) Students wrote comfortably about such topics as television, the regulation of smoking, a liberal arts education, and the appropriate legal age for drinking.

Second, what features within a topic influence the writer's performance? Readers noted that certain topics were producing more problematic essays: one topic, the question of whether to reduce penalties for women drivers because statistics indicate they hold better driving records, could not be argued convincingly from opposing viewpoints. With another stimulus, the right of minors to privacy in sexual matters, some students had difficulty distancing themselves from the emotional impact of the subject. Very uneven performance characterized the response to both topics. For example, many writers began well enough, but either failed to sustain the argument or to develop it through thoughtful amplification. Readers repeatedly identified these essays as ones which contained unsupported statements or evinced irregularities in tone and level of diction:

> Highway accident statistics show that women have fewer accidents and traffic violations than men, and many people feel that the law should therefore provide lighter penalties for women. This kind of discrimination against men misses the real issue: the need to remove bad drivers of <u>either</u> sex from the road.

> It is my believe that sex plays no major role in the ability to drive. The reason that women have fewer accidents is that usually they have children with them; therefore women have the precaution of driving carefully. In turn, men are usually in a hurry and the gas pedal is stepped on a little harder.

> <u>Yet, men are very sexist. They are always bragging about how well they drive.</u> Whenever a man is in a car with his wife or any other female for that matter and she does a slight mistake, he will right away jump on her and "Women, they (meaning the law) should get them out of the streets. Thats why there are so many accidents in this world."

Readers concluded that the topic was too often capable of drawing inexperienced writers away from carefully considered responses. In other essays, unevenness in tone and diction seemed indicative of a writer's struggle to sustain the motivation to write because the situation required it. Computer analysis of placement results will allow the ECB to alter or withdraw problematic instruments before Fall 1979 when assessment placements are mandatory.

Finally, how might the medium for the stimulus influence writer performance? A few committee members objected to using any alternative to a written stimulus. They argued that a visual stimulus would be more difficult to write from and would put writers at a disadvantage. Despite this argument the Committee determined that a visual stimulus should be developed and tested. The visual stimulus would offer material in parallel to a written stimulus so that organizational strategies could be analyzed in light of the same subject matter. The topic which raises questions about the influences of television upon young viewers was selected as subject for the visual stimulus.

The production of a video stimulus about television for a highly sophisticated audience of television watchers presented five special challenges:

(1) viewers of the videotape must be engaged by the images;

(2) visuals must be varied enough to appeal to the range of undergraduates who would see them;

(3) visuals must be free of possible copyright infringement but must suggest contemporary television programming;

(4) television must be perceived as different from film if writers' arguments were not to be weakened by inaccurate statements about electronic media;

(5) television must be presented as both influenced by and influencing people.

Production of the videotape was completed in four months. It was tested as a visual stimulus during the last four orientation days of 1978, the 7th through the 10th of August.

On each regular assessment day during the summer, from mid-June to August, approximately 100 students seated in an auditorium had written from a paragraph stimulus. On the four days when the visual stimulus was added, students entered the auditorium as usual and took seats. At this point,

every other student was requested to leave the auditorium for a room across the hall where two large monitors were set up at the front. Proctors distributed bluebooks as usual and the written stimulus was distributed with a preliminary statement added: "You have just watched a video-taped discussion about the benefits and disadvantages of television." Students in each group received identical verbal directions. Group A was in the auditorium; Group B was in the room with the monitors. The visual stimulus required three minutes and 20 seconds.

[SHOW THE TAPE]

At the end of one hour, all exam books of both groups were collected. Before ECB readers received the bluebooks the written directions were removed. Readers did not know which stimulus students had received. At the end of the four days in August, the number of students directed to take tutorial or introductory composition or given exemption was computed: there was no evidence that students performed less well from the visual stimulus. They had, on the whole, placed slightly better:

	Exempt	Intro. Comp.	Tutorial	Intro. Comp. with Writing Workshop [Needs limited Additional Help]	Total
Group A (Paragraph)	2	105	6	28	141
Group B (Paragraph and Visual)	3	96	8	22	129
	5	201	14	50	270

Readers had made notes about some of the essays. More often the visual stimulus was noted to have prompted well-balanced arguments on the subject of television. Writers who had seen the visual stimulus attempted to devise more complex arguments; their ideas were embedded in organizational structures that were more varied, and perhaps less polished, probably reflecting the increased fund of material upon which they could draw. Readers' comments indicated that essays written from the visual stimulus were more promising first drafts than those written from the paragraph stimulus: the writing samples contained a greater range of "individual" and "interesting"

examples. Writers having only the written stimulus produced more structurally similar essays; their examples were more often stereotypical ("Charley's Angels," "All in the Family"). These writers emphasized the negative results of television watching and less frequently developed arguments acknowledging positive benefits.

Selected examples from student essays illustrate readers' observations:

EXAMPLE I

[In this pair of responses Writer 1A begins to develop a balanced argument but returns quickly to establish that television can be "harmful". Writer 1B establishes that questions about television's effects are complicated by extreme views.]

Writer 1A--Written stimulus:

The average home in North America has a television set on for more than six hours a day. Every member of the average North American family watches at least three hours of television a day.

What does this mean? Well, on an average it means that every member of the average North American family spends one-fifth of their time awake watching television. Assuming then that that person either works or goes to school for approximately eight hours, he then spends about one-third of his 'spare time' watching television.

Is this then good or bad? First of all it depends upon what type of programs are watched, and secondly, what is done in their 'spare time' while they are not watching television. We first of all have to ask ourselves, or the other person, "Why am I, or you watching television?" Are we watching television because we enjoy it, because we hope to get something out of it, or are we just watching television for lack of something better to do. This is where I feel television can be harmful, when someone turns on the television and watches whatever is on for lack of something better to do....

Writer 1B--Visual stimulus:

The average home in North America has a television set on for more than six hours a day. Every member of the average North American family watches at least three hours of television a day. To declare that the effects of such viewing patterns are totally beneficial or totally harmful not only contradicts the beliefs of most viewers, but contradicts a wide array of statistics as well. There are fanatical advocates on both sides, those pointing out the violence and others pointing to educational benefits. The safest, most logical road for parents to take in establishing viewing patterns for their children is the middle road.

Complete isolation from television would prompt as many harmful effects in children as would constant exposure to it. The child isolated from tele-

vision would suffer psychologically because of his inability to share TV experiences with his peers. In isolating a child from television, one isolates him from hundreds of hours of beneficial conversation with other children. One also isolates him from the vivid representation of our throbbing, expanding and exciting world. To ignore the expanding potentials of television in the minds of children is to adversely affect their growing years.

EXAMPLE II

[In this pair of responses Writer 2A starts with the premise that the statistics are "frightening" while writer 2B begins to build examples which compare television to other mass communication efforts.]

Writer 2A--Written stimulus:

The average home in North America has a television set on for more than 6 hours a day. Every member of the average North American family watches at least 3 hours of television a day. This means that 21 hours a week are spent in front of a television by an average family member. When viewed in such short time spans, the hours are not necessarily seen as many. When you consider that this also means 84 hours a month a 1008 hours a year, the statistics become a bit more frightening. If you consider that your child is spending 42 days out of one year in front of a television set, you might begin to feel strongly about establishing a policy for television watching.

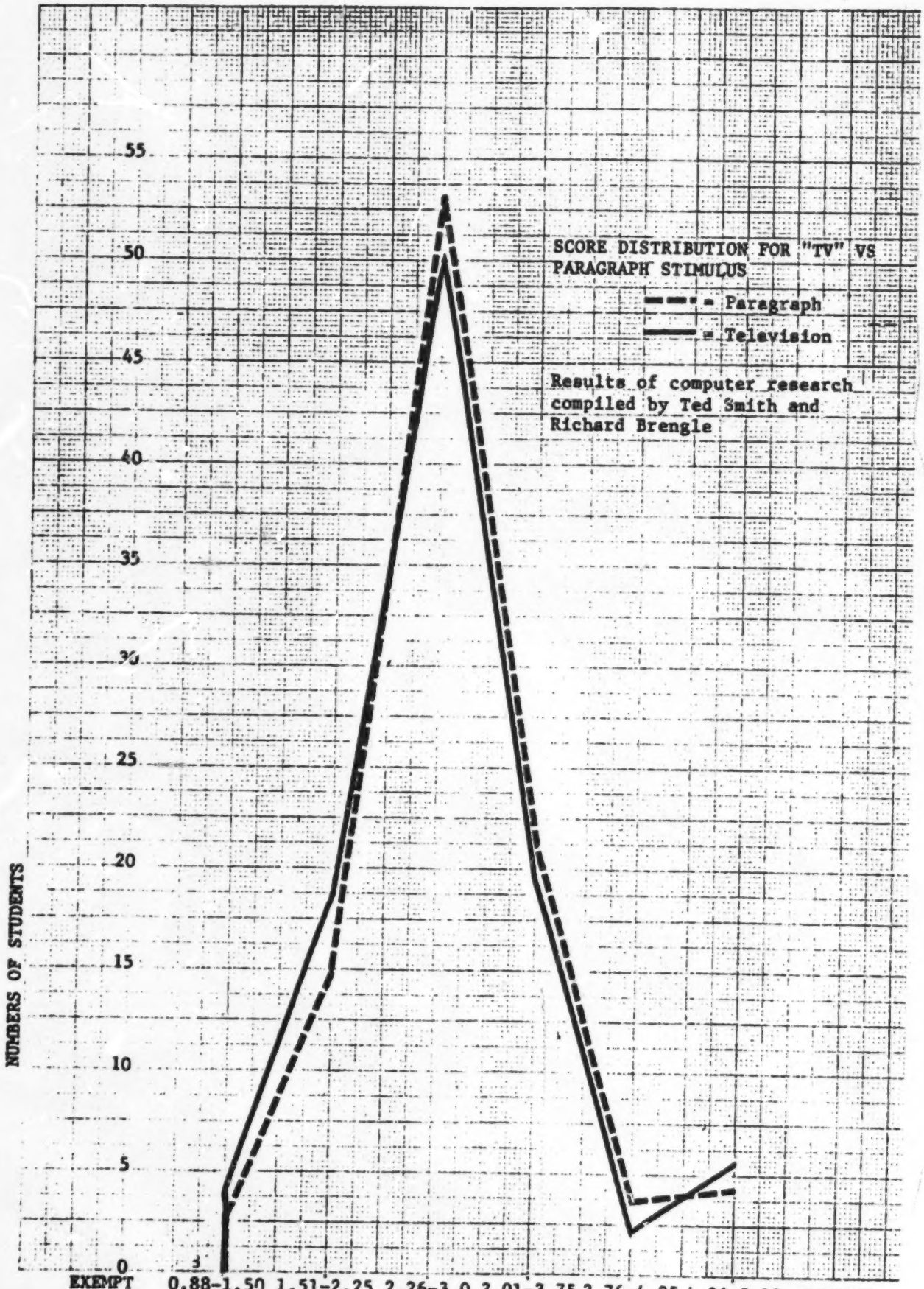
Writer 2B--Visual stimulus:

The average home in North America has a television set on more than 6 hours a day. Every member of the average North American family watches at least 3 hours of television a day. Common sense therefore indicates that television must have a profound effect on the American way of life. In fact, anything which bombarded a person for three hours a day would have an effect. A person could relate this TV bombardment to the propaganda loudspeakers found in Communist countries, such as China and Vietnam. These methods have worked for the Communists, chances are that they are also working in your home at this very second, if your television set is on.

Writers 1A and 2A restate or elaborate upon the statistical information given in the written stimulus. Writers 1B and 2B immediately raise questions about the statistics or use the statistics to build the context for an argument.

Parallel testing and analysis is necessary within our college-wide writing program because students in required upper-level writing courses will need to respond to a great range of stimuli. The ECB is charged with offering faculty seminars in the teaching of upper-level writing courses in all disciplines; therefore, writing about laboratory conditions, field

study experiences, art, theatre, film, music, news events, and human interactions will assume an importance for student writers comparable to writing from books and other printed materials. Assessment essays written from the sentence stimulus and from the visual stimulus do differ; the ECB plans to use evidence from these variations to assist faculty in the structuring of assignments and in the analysis of writing which results from them.


SCORE DISTRIBUTION FOR "TV" VS PARAGRAPH STIMULUS
Paragraph
Television
Results of computer research compiled by Ted Smith and Richard Brengle
NUMBERS OF STUDENTS
55
50
45
40
35
30
25
20
15
10
5
0
EXEMPT
0.88-1.50
1.51-2.25
2.26-3.0
3.01-3.75
3.76-4.25
4.26-5.15
TUTORIAL